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Allegiances

RoseClan

LEADER: **Featherstar -** Gray mackerel tabby molly with hazel eyes

DEPUTY: **Runningstorm -** White tom with yellow eyes

MEDICINE CAT(S): **Cloudpaw -** White molly with blue eyes

WARRIORS: **Aspenfrost -** White and ginger molly with light blue eyes

Dawnclaw - Pale gray molly with a white chest and green eyes
Apprentice, Ravenpaw

Ashstorm - Dark gray tom with hazel eyes

Ferretfoot - Brown classic tabby tom with a lighter underbelly and amber eyes
Apprentice, Emberpaw

Troutpelt - Ginger dorsal-striped tom with dark blue eyes

Lightningfoot - White molly with gray patches and brown eyes

Brownspots - Brown spotted molly with yellow eyes

Lionbranch - Long-haired golden tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Flypaw

Kestrelwatcher - Black molly with white paws and yellow eyes

Splashberry - Black and white patched tom with dark green eyes

APPRENTICES: **Cloudpaw -** White molly with blue eyes

Ravenpaw - White tom with red eyes

Flypaw - Gray tom with yellow eyes

Emberpaw - Ginger molly with green eyes

QUEENS: **Smokepounce -** Black molly with white ears and blue eyes (mother of Ferretfoot's kits: Deerkit, Doekit and Fawnkit)

KITS: **Deerkit -** Dark brown tom with amber eyes

Doekit - Light brown dorsal-striped molly with blue eyes

Fawnkit - Brown classic tabby molly with white ears and dark blue eyes

ELDERS: **Pikeshade -** Long-haired black tom with dark blue eyes and white ears

Flametooth - Ginger ticked molly with green eyes

VioletClan

LEADER: **Littlestar -** Nimble golden tom with white eyes

DEPUTY: **Halfstalk -** Tortoiseshell tom with yellow eyes

MEDICINE CAT(S): **Pidgeonwing -** Gray classic tabby molly with hazel eyes

WARRIORS: **Haretail -** Light brown tom with white flecks and amber eyes

Cricketpounce - Calico molly with dark green eyes

DahliaClan

LEADER: **Newtstar -** Ginger ticked tom with dark green eyes

DEPUTY: **Aldersea -** Long-haired white and gray molly with blue eyes

MEDICINE CAT(S): **Eelleaf -** Black tom with yellow eyes

WARRIORS: **Graysplinter -** Gray dorsal-striped tom with white

paws and dark blue eyes

APPRENTICES: **Shimmerpaw -** Black molly with white paws and light blue eyes

Chapter 1

The air is heavy with rain today, Cloudpaw knows that it will not be long before the dark clouds covering the sky unleash the water onto the ground below. Fitting for what RoseClan had discovered earlier, Rainwillow's cold body partly hidden under the ferns on the VioletClan border, deep claw marks slashed across her flank.

Cloudpaw still couldn't fully believe it, she kept turning her head towards the camp entrance and expecting her mentor to walk in with the same jovial vibe she always had, a spring in her step even at her old age.

But that never happened, instead, a group of mourning warriors brought her body to the middle of camp, respectfully stepping away to make room for Rainwillow's friends and family. Cloudpaw herself approached as well, wanting to give a final goodbye to her mentor.

Her ears twitched and something in her heart *squeezed* when she heard Ferretfoot wail, dropping down besides his sister, his littermate, and burying his nose in her fur. Almost immediately, Smokepounce was right next to him, wrapping her tail around her mate and pressing close to him, their three curious kits scampering along but staying quiet, seemingly understanding that this wasn't a time for questions.

Ashstorm, a senior warrior, settled down next to Cloudpaw, giving her a quick nod before focusing on his old friend, a slight tremble in his whiskers.

They all stayed like that as the sun slowly disappeared beneath the treetops, the darkness of night enveloping RoseClan.

Finally, Featherstar called a meeting, standing atop the stump that was once a magnificent tree, cut down by a heavy thunderstorm. The whole of RoseClan gathered to hear their leader's words.

"My Clanmates," her voice was rough, as if grief had lodged itself in her throat like a stone, "we have lost a much beloved member of RoseClan today, I wish Rainwillow a safe and calm journey to the stars of Silverpelt and I will never forget the tireless service she has given her Clan for moons on end."

"What about the claw-marks!?" Someone called, starting murmurs among the Clan.

Featherstar silenced them with a simple flick of her tail. A shiver ran through Cloudpaw when the old cat's gaze shifted to fully face her, almost scrutinizing.

"Tomorrow I will take a group of warriors with me to VioletClan and DahliaClan, and should they agree you Cloudpaw have my full permission to cross the borders if you ever find yourself in need of another medicine cat."

What? Surprised, Cloudpaw gaped at her leader, eyes wide. Featherstar was known as a strict cat and crossing the border was usually completely out of the question unless it was an emergency.

"I understand taking on full medicine duties will be hard when you are still only an apprentice," the leader continued, "therefore an exception can be made this time. And rest assured, when the owner of the claw-marks is found, they will pay *dearly*. Meeting dismissed."

As she walked away, the rain that had been threathening to fall began to drop down, soaking every cat's fur. Cloudpaw watched them all return to their dens, to rest and grieve, making her own way towards the medicine den.

As she curled up in her nest, three cats appeared at the entrance. Runningstorm, her father, and Aspenfrost, her mother, joined by her littermate Ravenpaw. Her family settled themselves next to her, provinding warmth and silent comfort as all four drifted off to sleep.

A figure weaved through the undergrowth, hidden by the darkness of night. They passed over a gentle brook, their pawsteps landing silently on

the half-submerged rocks. They came upon a small hole in the foliage, squeezing themselves to the other side. The figure took their place in the hidden grotto, eyes adjusting slightly to the dark.

"We are glad you could make it, Scout," a molly's voice sounded from within the shadows, another figure stepping out, flanked by three more cats.

Scout dipped their head in greeting, feeling slightly tense.

"What news did you bring?" A tom meowed, curiousity mixed with impatience in his tone.

"Our target suspects nothing, Viper, we are free to continue the plan with no adjustments."

"Always be ready for adjustments..." one of the smaller figures stated, gaining an approving nod from Slash, the molly who had spoken earlier.

"Soooo can we celebrate yet?" Scout sighed at Yew's comment, the young molly always too quick to jump into things.

Ignoring their fellow cat's words, Viper spoke again: "Weasel will soon infiltrate closer to our target, I expect you to support her in this endeavour."

"Of course, Viper."

And just like that, the conversation was over, all five cats slipping away into the night.

Chapter 2

Rainwillow's burial had been a sombre and quiet affair, with most of the Clan resuming their duties as normal in the following days, trying to distract themselves from their grief. Cloudpaw had taken up all medicine cat duties, having gained permission from both Littlestar and Newtstar to cross the border should she need too. Thus far she had been relieved to not have had a reason to go, going into another Clan's territory was still nerve-racking even when she knew it was allowed.

Things seemed to be going relatively okay, she'd stayed in camp for a few days following her mentor's death, not yet needing to restock supplies. Today however, she'd noticed a few herbs were growing very low in stock, mostly blackberry and daisy leaves. The latter often used to soote the elders' aching joints and the former almost necessary during Greenleaf, with so many bees zooming around. Kittens had a habit of accidentally getting stun while trying to play with the insects.

She'd need to go out to hopefully gather some today. Fortunately she knew a place where both plants grew near each other. Unfortunately that spot was near the VioletClan border. She wasn't sure how or who she could ask to join her, Featherstar forbidding her from going out of camp alone, something she was secretly glad for as it meant she'd be *safe*.

Some of the warriors had grown wary and even suspicious of the other Clan, being short and standoffish whenever they crossed paths with a border patrol. The younger cats tended to be the loudest about their suspicions but that didn't mean the senior warriors felt different, they just didn't say anything.

Well, there *was* one cat she could ask, one who she knew held no ill-will towards their fellow Clan. Lionbranch was a calm cat who never pointed paws without sufficient evidence. They'd been apprentices together for about two moons at which point he had earned his warrior name.

But asking Lionbranch meant she'd also be inviting *Flypaw* along. Cloudpaw didn't really *dislike* the tom but he was just Too Much sometimes. She tended to prefer time alone and he seemed to thrive when amongst other cats. A chatterbox.

Maybe she should just suck it up and ask, if he ever ended up in the medicine den she couldn't just refuse to treat him because he talked a lot and she didn't. With her mind made up, she took a deep breath, exaled, and went over to Lionbranch and his apprentice where they were settled near the fresh-kill pile.

She took care to avoid Troutpelt with a wide berth, not wanting him to hear anything about VioletClan. He had almost started a fight with a hunting patrol that had been slightly close to the border, luckily the VioletClan deputy Halfstalk was there to smooth things over and stop an all out brawl.

She approached Lionbranch, the tom noticing her and pausing in his eating to give her his attention. Flypaw's ear twitched in her direction but nothing more, too busy with his mouse.

"Goodmorning Cloudpaw, was there something you needed?" Lionbranch asked, turning to face her properly.

"I need to collect some herbs but, they're near the VioletClan border."

A look of understanding crossed Lionbranch's face. "You need a patrol to escort you, right? I didn't have anything planned yet today so me and Flypaw can go with you."

Cloudpaw nodded, relieved she wouldn't have to ask any other cat. She waited patiently for the two to finish their breakfast, exiting the camp soon after.

RoseClan's territory was mainly made up of woodlands, a river coming all the way from DahliaClan ran through from the north, splitting off into smaller rivers halfway through and disappearing into the wilderness at the southern border.

VioletClan cats generally hunted on the plains, which lay west of

the forest. It was strange that Rainwillow had even been found near such an open space. Did the killer want their deeds to be known?

Though maybe, if it wasn't a Clan cat then perhaps it didn't matter, a bypassing rogue, loner or kittypet wouldn't need to hide her body. Maybe it wasn't the work of another cat at all, but there had been no scent of a fox or a badger.

It was such a mystery and Cloudpaw quickly shook the thoughts from her head, she didn't want to think about it.

Flypaw was being surprisingly quiet during the patrol, only giving non-commital answers when Lionbranch asked him something. Maybe he was nervous? Or grieving Rainwillow's death? Had he noticed that Cloudpaw wasn't much of a talker and was staying quiet out of respect? A combination of all three?

Whatever it was, if he wanted to stay quiet and focus on the patrol she'd let him. She wasn't feeling very excited either.

Arriving at the border, the trio began gathering up the needed herbs. All was going fine, Cloudpaw did spot the VioletClan deputy Halfstalk with a couple of other cats but he just nodded at her and turned his attention back to his patrol.

Eventually, Lionbranch, Cloudpaw and Flypaw returned to camp with a large haul of herbs, leaving the stocks almost overflowing. It had been a good day, Cloudpaw thought.

Chapter 3

Cloudpaw was nervous, tonight the first full moon would shine since Rainwillow's death and it would be the first gathering she'd have to attend alone, without her mentor. Tensions between RoseClan and VioletClan hadn't calmed down in the sunrises since the old medicine cat's body had been found, Troutpelt and Splashberry being the most vocal with their accusations, and even the normally calm Ashstorm was starting to grow frustrated as the days went on. Some of VioletClan's more aggressive warriors had quite a lot to say whenever the two Clans met on patrols. Cloudpaw thought it'd be a miracle if this moon's gathering didn't end in a fight.

At the camp entrance -a collection of low-growing bushes, some of which had tiny thorns that RoseClan's cats knew to avoid with their eyes closed- Featherstar called to the warriors, apprentices and elders who'd be joining the gathering, Cloudpaw automatically included. The young molly raised herself to her paws and padded out of her den towards her already leaving Clanmates, falling into step besides Ravenpaw, her brother, and his mentor.

It was hard to spot the moon between the branches above, not much light making its way down to the forest floor. Cloudpaw kept her gaze downwards to avoid tripping over any loose stone or hidden root, not an easy feet with the limited amount of light.

Her ears flicked towards the mumbling of the cats around her but she did not join in their conversations, no cat invited her either, keeping a respectful distance except for Ravenpaw, who appeared to have an unending supply of energy, hopping along more than walking. He'd point out anything and everything that looked vaguely interesting, like a little green frog hiding on a leaf, or the line of ants carrying food back to their home, the tom didn't seem at all hindered by the meager moonlight. His constant observations

did help Cloudpaw to keep her mind off of the upcoming disaster-gathering, which she suspected he knew and was trying to cheer her up.

Finally, after what seemed like a very long walk, the dense trees turned sparse and the light of the full moon flooded over RoseClan's cats. It lit up the small flowering valley where the three Clans held their gatherings, the other Clans already waiting in the sea of petals.

The two elders, Pikeshade and Flametooth, immediately headed on over to the other group of elders, greeting them like old friends. While the warriors stayed a little more hesitant they too split up, mostly hanging around DahliaClan cats.

As Cloudpaw made her own way towards the medicine cats, Ravenpaw following close behind as he was the only RoseClan apprentice that had come along, she kept swivelling her head around to sort out which cats she recognized.

She spotted an older DahliaClan apprentice, Shimmerpaw, telling a likely highly embelished story to a group of younger VioletClan apprentices about the time she and her mentor had fought off a giant, ferocious fox. The VioletClan apprentices looked very impressed anyway.

Troutpelt had already started some sort of argument with Cricketpounce, the daughter of VioletClan's deputy Halfstalk. The calico molly was a fierce one and known to not so easily back down from a fight. At least Dawnclaw was close by and could seperate the two cats before they actually started fighting.

Haretail, a VioletClan warrior, and Graysplinter, a DahliaClan warrior, were sitting *very* close to each other, speaking in a hushed conversation. Cloudpaw didn't want to get involved in whatever was going on with them.

As she and Ravenpaw settled near Pigeonwing and Eelleaf, Newtstar called all the cats forward to begin the gathering. There wasn't a lot of news, a queen had recently given birth in DahliaClan and VioletClan had chased a badger out of their territory. Featherstar

still announced Rainwillow's death despite both other Clans already knowing about it, the news having spread like wildfire.

Unfortunately for the tentative peace that had been held thus far, the reminder of Rainwillow's murder seemed to snap said peace in half. A very angry Troutpelt -why had Featherstar even brought him along in the first place?- stepped forward and interrupted his leader to accuse VioletClan of being responsible for Rainwillow's death.

Cloudpaw's ears pinned down against her head, this was what she had been expecting and there was no way it could possibly go well, not after such a bold declaration.

At first, the cats in the valley stared at the ginger tom like he'd grown a second head, baffled expressions on their faces. Cloudpaw agreed with them, what kind of mousebrain would try and start a fight on the one night the Clans were absolutely not supposed to start a fight. But their faces quickly morphed into anger, though mainly from VioletClan, DahliaClan seemed to have decided they didn't want anything to do with this.

Cricketpounce bounced forward to growl in Troutpelt's face, tail lashing with force. "And how do we know you didn't kill her? Maybe you did, and you're blaming it on us!" She snarled, shrugging off Halfstalk, who had tried to pull his daughter away.

"Why would I kill my own medicine cat!?"

"You sound mouse-brained enough to me-"

"How dare you-"

They weren't the only ones arguing, Cloudpaw could see several others cats starting to yell and snarl, getting in each other's faces.

"Will every cat *shut up*!?" Featherstar bellowed, startling every cat in the valley, her claws scraping through the dirt. The leader did not look very happy, Cloudpaw was glad that she wasn't Troutpelt right now.

Dark clouds were crowding the moon, StarClan clearly shared Featherstar's anger. Could this gathering get any worse?

Chapter 4

Thunder boomed in the distance, lightning crackling between the clouds as all the gathered cats fell silent, the fury in Featherstar's eyes matched the ire of StarClan and when her scowling gaze slid over to Troutpelt, the tom shrunk into himself in embarrassment. He wisely stepped away from Cricketpounce and back into the crowd, by the expression on the VioletClan cat's face Cloudpaw could tell that she thought of this as a victory.

"This is a gathering," Featherstar began, voice cold as the ice of Leaf-bare, "and my warriors will not disturb the peace brought on by the full moon, I *suggest* that each of you remember this well." Her tone making it clear that this was not a suggestion at all but a very strict order.

A snicker sounded from somewhere within the gathered cats, namely on the side that VioletClan's cats had claimed for themselves. Featherstar's gaze instantly shifted towards the sound, her mouth curled in a frown and her tail lashing from side to side. But before she could say anything, Littlestar stepped forward until he was standing shoulder to shoulder with the RoseClan leader, white eyes searching over the spot his Clan occupied.

"That goes for my warriors as well, I do not want to hear of anymore fighting tonight, am I making myself clear?"

Someone coughed but no one dared to protest against the two leaders, especially when DahliaClan's leader Newtstar appeared at Featherstar's other side. The ginger tom held himself with an air of pride, chest puffed up and head high, his eyes making brief contact with the DahliaClan deputy who nodded at her leader, seemingly having understood his silent command.

The long-haired molly raised her tail to signal to the rest of DahliaClan, the cats collectively taking a few steps back as the deputy rose and padded closer to the group of leaders. Newtstar gave her another nod, turning to face the frozen gathering.

"DahliaClan will *not* be participating in whatever RoseClan and VioletClan have going on," Troutpelt bristled at the leader's stern voice but one look from Featherstar stopped him from speaking up, "I offer my condolences for the loss of Rainwillow but it is not our problem, fight this out amongst yourselves if you wish, DahliaClan will be taking our leave."

With a flourish of his tail, the tom strutted back over to his deputy, Aldersea only giving her leader a brief acknowledgement before ordering the Clan to return home. Eelleaf, who had been sitting among the other medicine cats, got up to follow his leader and deputy, though not before murmuring a quiet encouragement to Cloudpaw, the tom had lost his own mentor when he was quite young too, not to murder but he could still understand a little of what Cloudpaw might be going through. With that, DahliaClan disappeared into the surrounding bushes to the silence of the two remaining Clans.

It wasn't long before Featherstar and Littlestar put an end to the gathering and brought their own Clans home, leaving Cloudpaw alone in the medicine den for the night once again. It still felt weird, falling asleep without Rainwillow there, she still expected to be woken up by the older molly every day, she didn't know how long it'd be until she no longer expected a ghost to stand beside her nest or if she ever would, perhaps the memories of Rainwillow would be haunting her forever.

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It had been a few days since the gathering, Cloudpaw once again found herself on the border of a neighbouring Clan, though this time it was DahliaClan's border. Certain herbs only grew in their territory and the medicine cats of all cats had long ago made an agreement that the other Clans were free to take bits of whatever grew along the border as long as they left some behind for the Dahliaclan medicine cat. She had two warriors with her, her mother Aspenfrost and the much younger warior Brownspots who had been an apprentice when Cloudpaw was still a kit in the nursery. Those days felt so long ago now, when all she cared about was whether or not she could beat her brother in whatever competition they'd come up with for the day, yet she had only been an apprentice for three

moons at this point, it really wasn't all that long ago.

Her fluffy paws sifted through the leaves of the herbs that had sprouted along the border, slightly crossing over into RoseClan territory, downcast eyes searching for the healthier leaves, this plant didn't seem to be doing all too well. It was droopy and some of the leaves were more brown than green, not a good sign.

It was as if the plant reflected her mood, and that of the entire Clan. The disaster of a gathering was still planted firmly in every cat's minds, even those that hadn't been there were aware of the tension between them and VioletClan that had only grown after Troutpelt's 'genius' idea to start a fight with their deputy's *daughter*, though Cloudpaw was mostly relieved no blood had been spilled.

And while the Clan was dealing with a potential war brewing on the horizon, the young medicine cat had her own struggles. Some cats had begun approaching her, asking if Rainwillow had contacted her from StarClan, even Featherstar had been side-eying her, though the leader hadn't actually said anything yet, unlike *certain* cats who did not appear to know the meaning of the word 'tact'. And every time someone asked, the only answer Cloudpaw could give them was *no, StarClan had not spoken a word to her*.

Loud, booming barks shattered her thoughts and scattered them to the winds as she hastily looked up towards the sound. Aspenfrost and Brownspots had sprung up beside her, prepared for a fight as the three cats spotted a large dog bounding through DahliaClan's territory, chasing after a strange cat Cloudpaw had never seen before. The cat was heading straight for them, if they tried to rush back to camp they'd be bringing the dog right along with them, there was no other choice but to stand their ground and fight.

The warriors shared one glance with one another and charged forwards, leaving Cloudpaw to intercept the out of breath stranger, scratch marks lining their fur though not too deep thankfully, a few days of rest should heal them right up. Cloudpaw was more worried about the panic in the other cat's eyes and the way they trembled on their legs, looking like they were about to faint at any moment.

Cloudpaw would have to leave her mother and Brownspots behind

to fight alone, she couldn't help the stranger here, not when the dog was still so close. She heard Aspenfrost yowl at her to leave and go back to camp but even with permission, her heart still clenched in fear and guilt as she led the stranger home as fast as possible, uncertain of the two warriors' fate.

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Dark clouds covered the moon, leaving barely any light to reach the forest floor below as a small group of cats gathered within a thicket of thorny brambles, leaves getting stuck in their fur. They hid themselves away in the shadows, concealed from the sight of the stars.

"So? Did everything go according to plan?" Viper spoke up first, directing his words to the group's youngest member, barely older than a kit.

"Mostly," Weasel answered, leaning into Yew as the molly rested her tail across Weasel's flank in silent comfort, already aware that things hadn't gone exactly as was planned. "They accepted me but I still want to be careful, I almost didn't make it."

Viper nodded, not angry or upset in any way, but it was clear that the tom was deep in thought, his face set in a frown.

"Scout will be there to stand by your side, and you have our faith," Slash meowed, watching as Scout settled down next to Weasel at the older molly's words, once again reminded of the promise he had made to these cats, one he would never break.

And so the plan was set in motion.

Chapter 5

Exhausted, terrified and worried, Cloudpaw stumbled into camp along with the dark ginger-furred stranger, startling the warriors hanging around camp, their eyes wide and tails bristling. Her Clanmates calmed down slightly when they noticed Cloudpaw but shot suspicious glances towards the injured cat.

Before anyone could say anything, Cloudpaw gasped out the names of Aspenfrost and Brownspots as she tried to catch her breath. Runningstorm was at her side in an instant, the deputy springing up from his spot besides Featherstar and rushing over to his daughter.

"Cloudpaw? What's wrong? Who is this?" His yellow eyes flicked briefly towards the stranger, a brown molly with a white-furred underbelly. The young cat was still gasping for breath, trembling on her paws as she leaned against Cloudpaw who offered silent support.

"Dad," the medicine cat meowed, "you have to help mom and Brownspots! There's a dog, it was chasing this cat near the border!"

Fear flashed across the deputy's face but he quickly schooled his expression into something neutral, "where?" He asked, his voice shaking despite how hard he tried to keep it steady.

"DahliaClan, we were collecting herbs. Please hurry, I don't know how long they can hold it off!"

Runningstorm didn't need to be told anything more, quickly rounding up a team of experienced warriors and leading the charge to aid his mate and former apprentice. The battle patrol raced past Cloudpaw but all she could now focus on was the small cat standing beside her, she looked to be around apprentice-age though a few moons younger than Cloudpaw herself.

"Come with me," she whispered to the still terrified cat. "I'll get you somewhere quiet to rest, away from prying eyes." The molly gave

her a slight nod and Cloudpaw led her new charge into the medicine den, confidant that no one would stop her, even if the cats in camp were all watching with curious eyes.

It was an unspoken law amongst the Clans that medicine cats had the final say when it came to offering help and healing to cats outside the Clan. Even the strict Featherstar who usually only adhered to the rules dictated by the Warrior Code knew not to get involved when a medicine cat had made their decision.

Relieved, the stranger sank down into the moss Cloudpaw provided, finally able to breathe normally again. Now that neither of them were running for their lives, the apprentice noticed that at least one cut looked to be a bit worse than the rest, something she hadn't noticed at first glance. It was still bleeding slightly and the stranger winced when Cloudpaw lightly prodded near the wound with her paw, a mesh of chewed up herbs in her mouth that would hopefully aid the healing process.

"What's your name?" She asked as she worked, remembering the time Rainwillow had first shone her how to best apply poultices along with cobweb.

"My name?" The stranger hesitated, tail-tip twitching. "It's um, my name is-" She fell silent for a moment. "Ermine, my name is Ermine." The newly named molly finally meowed with hesitance as if she hadn't known her own name before this moment. Kinda weird but Cloudpaw wasn't here to judge.

"Okay then, Ermine," She began, "You're not too badly hurt and those scratches should heal up within a few days though I'd like for you to stay here so I can keep an eye on how well this one is healing." She pointed to the wound she'd just applied the herbs to, "Featherstar will want to speak with you soon but I don't think there's anything for you to worry about, RoseClan won't sent an injured cat out to fend for themselves, especially not when I have anything to say about it."

"Okay," Ermine nervously responded, "um, what's 'RoseClan' and who is Featherstar?"

Ah, right. Ermine probably had no idea where she was and who she was with, she wouldn't have been paying much attention where she was going while getting chased by the dog. Cloudpaw felt a little silly for forgetting that not all cats would know what the Clans were.

"RoseClan is where you are right now," the apprentice began to explain. "We're a group of cats that hunt and fight together, survival is easier when you have cats you can trust by your side. Featherstar is our leader, she was the molly sitting on the big stump when we came into camp."

"Oh, are you all a family?" Ermine asked, head tilted to the side in confusion. She must never have met a Clancat before.

"Well, some of us are related by blood but that doesn't really matter. We all help each other, even if we're not all friends exactly," Cloudpaw meowed, recalling her irritation of Flypaw's general existance but she knew that no matter what, he was her Clanmate first and foremost and she'd never allow her own personal feelings to stop her from helping him if he needed it.

Ermine blinked at this new information and Cloudpaw decided to give her some time alone to process while she went to speak with Featherstar, wanting to give her own report about the dog before the patrol came back, hopefully without too many injuries.

Chapter 6

Featherstar was already waiting for her near the medicine den, politely keeping her gaze on the sky instead of trying to get a peek at Ermine, like the Clan's three kits appeared to be doing. Luckily for Cloudpaw, they were whisked away by their exhausted mother before they could bother the injured molly, loudly complaining that they were just curious and definitely wouldn't cause any trouble.

The medicine cat apprentice turned her gaze away from the rambunctious kits and settled down next to Featherstar, suddenly feeling strangely shy. RoseClan's leader was an intimidating cat, even to her own Clanmates at times though she was not unkind. She simply held herself to a high standard and it had earned her the respect of several cats even outside of RoseClan. It had made Rainwillow worried sometimes, the late medicine cat had told Cloudpaw that she feared Featherstar may burn herself out with the amount of work the leader piled onto herself. In secret of course, it would have been rude to say so to Featherstar's face, Rainwillow had been sure to tell her apprentice that she needed to keep an eye on RoseClan's leader, just in case something ever happened to the older medicine cat and she could no longer help Featherstar herself. Well, Cloudpaw supposed that time had come and it was now her duty to make sure Featherstar wasn't pushing herself too hard. It seemed like a daunting task.

"-oudpaw?" Abruptly, Cloudpaw was brought out of her musings at the sound of her name being called, turning her head to face Featherstar who looked a bit concerned, how long has she been trying to get Cloudpaw's attention?

"Yes?" Cloudpaw answered awkwardly, shaking herself out of her thoughts and attempted to bring her focus back to the conversation.

"I asked how our new guest was doing," Featherstar meowed, voice impassive but whiskers twitching slightly, luckily she didn't seem to be upset with Cloudpaw.

"She's doing fine, I don't think the dog managed to get her, she probably got scratched by some thorns while she was running, she should be healed within about seven sunrises."

"Hm, and this dog... You said it was near DahliaClan's border?"

"*In* DahliaClan, and it was *big*, I don't think I've ever seen a dog so large," Cloudpaw shivered at the memory, shoving her worry for her mother, Brownspots and the patrol aside, it wouldn't help her to imagine all the things that could go wrong, the herb stores were doing well and her Clanmates were strong. She needed to have faith in them.

Featherstar seemed to be contemplating her answer for a few heartbeats, eventually the leader sighed and meowed: "We better report this to Newtstar as fast as possible, accusations of tresspassing would not be in our favour, not now."

Confused, Cloudpaw tilted her head as she stared at Featherstar. When would Something like that *ever* be in their favour? She didn't get the chance to ask as Featherstar rose up from where she'd been sitting, giving Cloudpaw a nod to signal that this conversation was over.

The apprentice didn't wait around to see where she went, turning around to head back into the medicine den where she found Ermine staring at the wall.

The molly didn't seem to notice Cloudpaw and she had to call the other's name a few times to get her attention.

"Oh, hi! Sorry I was lost in thought..." Ermine meowed, turning her head to face Cloudpaw. "Am I needed for anything? I can hunt if you need compensation?"

Cloudpaw frowned, compensation? "But you're injured?"

Ermine's tail twitched slightly, "it doesn't hurt *that* bad," she lied. "I can help you find replacements for the herbs you used on me instead?"

"You don't need to do anything like that, and definitely not while

your still healing. Somecat might ask if you want to join them on a hunt when you're healed but we don't expect you to get up and do so right away."

Ermine seemed baffled by her words and Cloudpaw found herself sharing the sentiment, what kind of life did a cat lead where they couldn't even stop and let themselves rest, to let themselves heal?

"So, what do I do then? Just wait until the scratches are gone?"

The look on Cloudpaw's face told Ermine that that was exactly what she was supposed to do.

The two fell silent and Cloudpaw awkwardly began sorting the herb stores despite the fact that she'd already done so this morning.

At least she'd be prepared for when the patrol came back.

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Cloudpaw watched from her spot near the chervil plants she was collecting as Ravenpaw stalked a mouse nearby. Her brother had originally joined her to look for some of the herbs she needed but ended up getting distracted by the easy prey.

She didn't want to disturb him, the herbs could wait and the Clan wouldn't say no to the extra food. They were struggling to keep up lately, the patrol had managed to drive the dog out but not without injury, Cloudpaw's den was so full she could barely move around in there, Featherstar had even been thinking of expanding it due to the high demand.

They were down to only having five warriors, including Featherstar herself, available to hunt and patrol as Lightningfoot had moved to the nursery, awaiting the birth of her kits.

Even with the help of the apprentices RoseClan still found the fresh-kill pile to fall short every night and some cats would go to their nest still hungry.

Ermine was visibly getting more uncomfortable by the day, waiting for her wounds to heal. It was clear she was blaming herself for the

Clan's troubles and was eager to get out of the medicine den so she could lend a paw.

Cloudpaw had overheard the elders gossiping about the young cat, wondering whether she might choose to stay once she got a better understanding of how Clanlife worked. It wasn't unheard of, Flametooth herself had been a rogue before joining RoseClan.

Cloudpaw thought the existance of a murderer might sway Ermine's decision, Troutpelt hadn't exactly been quiet about his suspicion the last few days either, throwing many glances Ermine's way any time he saw her. Cloudpaw didn't think she had anything to do with it, despite being a medicine cat Rainwillow had insisted on knowing how to defend herself and had intended to teach Cloudpaw some basic fighting moves as well but sadly never got around to it. An apprentice-aged cat would not have been able to kill her, not even in an ambush.

Maybe Cloudpaw should ask Featherstar if she could get some battle training, once the Clan was no longer short on warriors?

A startled shout and a frantically rustling bush ripped her out of her thoughts and she turned her head to see Ravenpaw half stuck in the previously mentioned bush, fur and tail puffed up in alarm as he tried to shake himself loose. The mouse was held carefully between his teeth so she asumed he must have pounced on it and then rolled right into the bush. Well at least he caught the thing.

Quickly she got up to help him out but not before laughing at how ridiculous he looked wriggling around like that, what else were siblings for?

Chapter 7

Cloudpaw leaped forward, twisting to the side at the last moment to avoid Troutpelt's pawstrike, causing the warrior to stumble and lose his balance while she quickly darted forward to push him over into the dirt and moss, attempting to pin him down.

Her paws barely made contact with his fur before the tom whirled around to dodge the attack, swiftly leaping to the other side of the clearing. His eyes narrowed as he turned to face her again, tail swishing behind him in agitation.

"Is that really the best you can do?" he taunted as he began slowly circling around her.

Cloudpaw said nothing, dropping back into a crouch with her fur raised high to make herself look bigger.

Troutpelt snickered before leaping at her, pinning her but unable to avoid a swipe to his cheek though it was clear he had the upperpaw. He was larger than her and she hadn't had any battle training, leading to her skills being as weak as a kitten. Well, a kitten that had won most of the sparring matches she'd had with her brother so Troutpelt had better *watch out.*

She grabbed his leg in her jaws, catching him off guard and managing to push him off of her, rolling away before standing back up. They both stared at each other, assessing the other while they planned their next move.

"Hey, you two!" Kestrelwatcher's voice sounded from behind the trees, catching their attention and making both turn their heads towards her. "You done with training yet? Me and Ermine we're hoping to join Cloudpaw on a mission to Twolegplace to gather some catmint. We heard you were all out."

"Why is *she* here though? She's not a warrior." Troutpelt hissed, pointing to Ermine who had just stepped out into the clearing along

with Kestrelwatcher with his tail.

"Uhm, because I'm taking up your resources and I thought it'd be polite to help replace some? Besides I've been in Twolegplaces before, trust me once you've seen one you've seen them all."

Before Troutpelt could say anything back, Cloudpaw cut in with a grateful 'yes', happy to have some help. The tom grumbled something under his breath at the interruption and even though Cloudpaw was standing close to him she couldn't quite make out what he said.

"Fine then," Troutpelt huffed, "but I'll be going to, I don't want you two alone with her." He fixed Ermine with a glare that made Cloudpaw shiver.

Kestrewatcher rolled her eyes, "we can handle ourselves just fine but we could definitely use a catmint carrier. Come on, let's go before we lose too much sunlight."

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The group remained mostly silent as they travelled to the nearby Twolegplace, either lost in their own minds or too nervous too start up a conversation with the tensions still high. Troutpelt was staunchly ignoring Ermine's presence, staring straight ahead as the four cats finally emerged from the forest and set paw on the stony roads of Twolegplace. Cloudpaw had only been here once before; when Rainwillow first showed her how to properly collect catmint, explaining that no medicine cat should ever take too much as Twolegs might notice and become upset. It was best to steer clear of their ire, lest they come to the forest with their cat-sized silver dens, cats who got caught in those had never returned home in any of the three Clans' long history.

Kittypets and strays stared at the four cats as they passed through, only stopping to check if there was any catmint around and never lingering for too long. Cloudpaw could feel their gaze burning on her pelt even as she tried to ignore them. She wondered what they must be thinking, seeing four strangers waltzing into their home without even a 'hello'.

"Are we *done* yet? How long are you gonna keep us wandering in this maze of ugly dens, Cloudpaw?" Troutpelt complained out of nowhere, snapping the medicine cat apprentice out of her thoughts.

"We haven't even found any catmint, does the word 'patience' mean anything to you?" Ermine reminded him, a bit of a bite to her voice.

He grumbled at the response but fell silent again, walking a little faster to get ahead of everyone else.

"Well he's a ray of sunshine today, isn't he?" Kestrelwatcher commented, put off by his attitude.

Cloudpaw sighed, turning her face up towards the sky to watch the dark clouds rolling in. "He's been like this ever since Rainwillow's passing, he thinks everyone not from RoseClan is a suspect."

"If you ask me I'd tell you I think he's just using her murder as an excuse to be mean, he didn't even like her much when she was still alive." Kestrelwatcher meowed then sighed. "I don't know why he suddenly acts like such a foxheart, he was a good mentor to me. Now he's just, like this."

"Maybe he knows something we don't? About Rainwillow's death I mean." Cloudpaw wondered aloud.

"I doubt it, if he'd found anything out he'd be shouting it from the tree tops you can be sure of that." Kestrelwatcher answered.

It was as if the weather had noticed the mood, rain beginning to fall down from the clouds in a torrent, splattering harshly against the cats' fur. In a flash, the streets were completely abandoned save for the three Clan cats and Ermine, the cats that had been staring at them rushing for their homes where it was nice and dry.

"Oh well that's just great," Troutpelt growled, staring at his own soaked pelt like it had personally offended him. "We have no catmint *and* we're caught in a storm." Lightning struck in the sky just as he finished his sentence.

"We need to find shelter, head for the overgrown alley ways. If we go far enough there'll probably be some old Twoleg dens that aren't

being used anymore." Ermine meowed, starting to lead the group to the nearest grass-covered alley way.

They quickly followed after her, even Troutpelt, with their heads ducked low to avoid the rain from falling in their eyes. It felt like it took forever but eventually Ermine alerted the rest with an excited *mrrow*, having found a gap in the wall of a very clearly abandoned Twoleg den. With a relieved sigh, the four cats all piled in immediately, happy to be out of the rain.

They made themselves as comfortable as they could amidst all the broken Twoleg stuff, preparing for a nap as the storm outside continued to rage. No one noticed the sounds of claws scraping against the wooden beams above them.

Chapter 8

Weasel was dreaming, she knew it was a dream as her paws were able to float through the air, bringing her up higher and higher until she could sprawl among the fluffy clouds. She could hear the faint sound of birdsong all around her but whenever she turned her head to look, the birds always seemed out of sight. From her cloudy perch, she gazed at the ground bellow racing past her in a blur.

Suddenly, the cloud she was on poofed away and she gently floated down to the ground. Trees came into view, red and murky with spiky thorns crawling along their branches. No fear curled around her heart as she descended, the familiar surroundings bringing her a sense of calm and quiet. She knew who was waiting for her down below as she could already hear their voices float up into the air like bubbles atop the water.

Weasel's paws pressed down softly into the muddy soil of the Dark Forest and she pranced forward into a large group of bushes, careful to avoid the sharp thorns. Inside the bushes was a small clearing, just big enough for five cats to sit without having to be uncomfortably close to each other. Everyone else was already here and Weasel gave a respectful nod to Slash and Viper before making her way over to Yew and Scout, eager to say hello to her friends.

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A pained yowl split the air and Cloudpaw shot up wide awake, eyes still bleary from sleep. She frantically searched for the source of the noise and as her sight cleared, she spotted Troutpelt growling and snarling at a huge *rat*, the tom's hindleg bleeding from an obvious bite wound. In a flash, Kestrelwatcher had pounced on the creature and dragged it away from Troutpelt, struggling to hold on to the squirming mass of fur.

Cloudpaw stood frozen, her ears pinned down to her head and her tail puffed up in fear. From somewhere close to her, Ermine gave a startled shout as more rats descended from the ceiling, landing on top of the cats like rain. Soon after, chaos erupted as the four
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desperately tried to escape the horde of rats. Kestrelwatcher had dropped the one she was holding in favour of clawing at the face of another that had been headed straight for Cloudpaw. The apprentice shook herself out of her frozen state and made to run for the exit, clumsily swiping at a couple of rats in hopes of clearing the way.

Both Kestrelwatcher and Troutpelt joined her soon after, using their own bodies to shield the younger cat. Behind her, Cloudpaw could hear Ermine's pawsteps bringing up the rear, hissing at any rat that came too close to the molly. All four cats just about flung themselves out of the broken Twoleg den, their paws scrabbling against the wet stone outside, the rain having turned them slippery. The rats didn't follow but when Cloudpaw looked back she could still see their beady little eyes glaring at her.

Still, the group only stopped to catch their breath once the Twoleg den was no longer in sight and Cloudpaw took the moment to check Troutpelt's wound over. It was bleeding but Cloudpaw didn't think it would be a problem unless it got infected, which rat bites had a tendency to do. Hopefully she still had some burdock roots or garlic in stock or she'd have to go on *another* supply run after getting the catmint. She quickly took note of everyone else's injuries too, which appeared to be mostly scratches thankfully but Kestrelwatcher *did* have a nasty looking bite on her tail, Cloudpaw would have to keep an eye on that.

"Well," Ermine spoke up after they'd all regained their bearings, "that was not the wake-up call I expected." She seemed a bit nervous but Cloudpaw just chalked that up to the sudden appearance of the rats and thought nothing else of it.

"Says the cat who led us into that den," Troutpelt huffed with a slight growl in his voice. "I've had enough, I'm going back to camp with or without you three." Turning away, the tom began to stalk off back towards the forest but Kestrelwatcher stopped him before he could get very far.

"What about the catmint, we can't just leave until we find it." She meowed but Troutpelt just glared at her and pushed the molly away with his shoulder.

"You three can go do that then, just be careful *she* doesn't bring you into another rat nest." With that, Troutpelt walked away without even a glance back at his Clanmates.

The three cats stood there for what felt like forever, each unsure on what they should do now- chase after him? Demand he come back and help? Should they just let him go? Cloudpaw stared down at her frontpaws, she knew Troutpelt was suspicious of Ermine but to the point that he would blame her for the rats even though they'd been attacking her too and then up and leave his Clanmates like this? Did Rainwillow's passing really affect him *that much*?

"Come on," Kestrelwatcher meowed softly, shaking Cloudpaw out of her thoughts, "let's go find that catmint ourselves. With any luck we'll be back before sundown and I want to know what Featherstar has to say about Troutpelt's actions today."

As it turned out, when Cloudpaw, Kestrelwatcher and Ermine finally returned home with the catmint they found out *exactly* what Featherstar had to say. The leader was *furious*, puffed up tail lashing from side to side and her hazel eyes burning with the fury of the sun. The group had walked into camp just in time to hear her bellow out a lecture on 'responsibility' and 'safety' to Troutpelt, who did not seem very happy in the slightest. Regardless, he said nothing and simply slinked away when Featherstar finally finished her rant. He somehow still managed to send a particularly dirty look towards Ermine that Featherstar didn't catch.

The molly took a moment to compose herself and then turned towards Cloudpaw and the others with none of the previous anger in her eyes. She even offered to help bring the catmint to the medicine den so they could take a rest quicker, Cloudpaw happily accepted the offer and let herself plop into her nest right after. She didn't want to sleep just yet, instead pawing at the feathers that Ravenpaw must have lined the moss with, he always did things like that.

Her thoughts drifted off to something she'd been dreading ever since Rainwillow was found dead, the next half-moon meeting was only a few days away and she'd never been there without her mentor. It made Cloudpaw nervous. She knew she had to go

though, it wouldn't do for RoseClan's medicine cat to be absent from the meeting. Sighing, Cloudpaw rolled over onto her side and pulled some the feathers closer to her. Maybe Featherstar would let her take a warrior with her since she was still an apprentice.

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Weasel sat down next to Yew, meowing a 'hello' to Scout who returned the greeting with a purr. He looked a bit dishevelled, leaves and sticks stuck in his fur but he hardly seemed to notice as he and Yew continued talking, dragging Weasel into their conversation.

"Weasel, could you please tell Yew that she's wrong and I'm right? I've been trying to convince her for so long but she's being stubborn."

"That depends on what exactly you think you're right about," Weasel answered with a laugh.

"Don't listen to him Weasel, this tom thinks rabbits are somehow harder to catch than birds," Yew told her, snickering to herself.

"They're fast!"

"Maybe you're just slow-"

"At least rabbits don't have wings," Weasel meowed cutting the two off before they could start an argument. "Isn't it still just based on skill anyway? Some cats run faster, some cats leap higher."

Scout grumbled at that which told Weasel that she was correct and he just didn't want to admit it. She'd take the win for what it was. Before any of them could say anything more they were called over by Viper, ready to start the meeting.

Slash sat up as the three approached and settled down before her and Viper, taking her place beside the tom. "First things first, I am glad to report that things are progressing well on our end," she meowed with pride. "But of course, we all know the importance of Weasel's mission, the plan can't continue on without her efforts so," the molly's calculating gaze came to rest on the young cat in question. "How have things been going? Does our target suspect anything?"
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"No, she doesn't. She's been too distracted to notice anything wrong. I hope I can get more information soon but it's all been a little overwhelming." Weasel answered, "maybe once things calm down a bit I'll have more to tell."

Slash nodded at that and so did Viper, the meeting continuing on like that. Sometimes, Weasel could swear she felt eyes on her but she wasn't bothered. It was probably just some Dark Forest cats, they wouldn't care much about a couple of scheming cats, they did enough of that themselves.

And then she was violently janked out of her dream with a startled yowl, the last things she saw were the confused faces of her friends.

Chapter 9

The halved moon shone brightly in the night sky, Cloudpaw stared up at it as she walked along with Dawnclaw, the warrior having volunteerd to go with her for the medicine cats' meeting. Neither of them were expecting any trouble as the other Clans' medicine cats had always been very kind to Cloudpaw but they still didn't want to take any chances, not with Rainwillow's death still hanging over them like a storm cloud.

Cloudpaw wondered if StarClan would speak to her tonight, if there was anything they wanted to tell her about Rainwillow? She hadn't been approached in her dreams so she figured StarClan must have been waiting for the half-moon meeting. Did they know who killed her and would they tell Cloudpaw that or choose to keep it vague, like she'd heard they sometimes did? What if StarClan *didn't* know who had taken out her mentor?

All these questions were making her head spin and she briefly shook her head to clear them from her mind. Dawnclaw noticed the movement and asked if she was okay, if there was something wrong?

"I just have a lot on my mind, I'm fine." Cloudpaw reassured the warrior and picked up the pace a little bit, she didn't want to be late and make her fellow medicine cats wait. It wasn't long before she stood in front of a hollowed out stump of a once large tree, glistening rain water having filled it up. The moon's reflection glowed and Cloudpaw sat down beside the stump, staring at it as she waited for the others to arrive.

Eelleaf of DahliaClan and Pigeonwing of VioletClan emerged from the bushes at almost exactly the same time, nodding towards each other as well as Cloudpaw and Dawnclaw before sitting down themselves. No one spoke, the cold night's wind ruffling their fur as the moon climbed higher in the sky.

Usually, they would've taken the time to discuss any recent events

in their respective Clans but not this time. Tensions with VioletClan were still high and though Cloudpaw knew Pigeonwing to be a calm cat, she likely still wasn't happy with the constant accusations against her Clan. Cloudpaw thought that made a lot of sense, especially since it had become clear to her in previous meetings that Pigeonwing and Rainwillow had been close friends. Of course she wouldn't want to believe that one of her own Clanmates could've killed RoseClan's medicine cat.

The entirety of DahliaClan had made sure that everyone understood they didn't want anything to do with the situation, so Cloudpaw didn't think it was weird that Eelleaf decided to stay silent too.

Perhaps both of them were hoping StarClan would have answers.

All at once, the three medicine cats stepped forwards towards the stump, dipping their heads just far enough that they could take a single lick of water. Cloudpaw felt herself fall into her dreams faster than ever before, StarClan must *really* want to speak with her.

She opened her eyes standing in the flowering meadow where StarClan cats came to meet with those still living. She spent a quick moment in awe of the gorgeous scenery - so many different flower species that bloomed in every colour - before lightly shaking her head, she had a StarClan cat to find. She wandered through the meadow for awhile when she spotted a familiar-looking cat with stars in her fur. Cloudpaw's eyes lit up and she happily ran to greet her, ecstatic to see her grandmother again!

Rowanbranch had still been an elder when Cloudpaw was apprenticed to Rainwillow and a different StarClan cat had greeted her on her first trip to the stump. One of RoseClan's past medicine cats as it was tradition for a new medicine cat apprentice to be welcomed by a well-respected cat from times past.

"Rowanbranch!" Cloudpaw yelled out, catching the ginger molly's attention who turned and visibly lit up at the sight of her granddaughter.

"Cloudpaw! There you are, I've been looking for you," Rowanbranch meowed as the two cats met and pressed their noses together in

greeting. "I'm so sorry about what happened to Rainwillow, it can't be easy doing all the medicine duties by yourself and at such a young age too. You're always welcome to visit the stump and ask for guidance, I and many others here would love to help in any way we can."

Cloudpaw smiled softly, "thank you I'll keep that in mind." She meowed before taking a deep breath, it was time to ask a very serious question. "Rowanbranch? Does StarClan know who... killed Rainwillow? Is she here somewhere?"

She could immediately tell that the answer to her question might not be what she wanted to hear as Rowanbranch's expression fell and her long fluffy tail came up to rest on Cloudpaw's back. "I'm sorry Cloudpaw, whoever took your mentor's life was clever enough to avoid StarClan's gaze while doing so, I'm afraid we do not know who was resposible. We can't ask Rainwillow either because she's, uhm, she's not here."

"What does that mean? Where is she then?" Cloudpaw asked, tilting her head to the side.

Rowanbranch suddenly seemed very uncomfortable, "oh, uhm, you see Cloudpaw-" She cut herself off and closed her eyes to think. Cloudpaw kept staring at her, waiting for an answer.

But she never got one as her eyes began to feel heavy and she knew she was going to wake up soon but tried to fight it, she needed to know what Rowanbranch meant! It was no use, her dream faded away like mist and she found herself back at the stump, staring down at the moon's reflection in the water.

That had been a very short conversation, completely unlike the other times she'd gone to visit StarClan. Rowanbranch had said that Rainwillow wasn't in StarClan but seemed reluctant to share where exactly Cloudpaw's mentor was if not with her ancestors, did she not know either? Or could it perhaps be that she DID know but just didn't want to tell Cloudpaw? Why wouldn't she?

Looking both left and right Cloudpaw noticed that the two other medicine cats were waking up as well, the three cats made eye-

contact with each other and from the looks on their faces Cloudpaw knew they were in for a long discussion about what they'd each been told by StarClan. Cloudpaw wondered if Eelleaf and Pigeonwing had received the same vague answer that she did but knew she wouldn't have to wait long to get that answer.

Pigeonwing looked like she was on the verge of sobbing, her claws tearing deep marks into the dirt. "She's- she's not in StarClan..." The older molly murmured, her voice strained as if she was trying very hard not to yowl her woes into the night sky.

Eelleaf had a very serious expression on his face, one Cloudpaw hadn't often seen on the silly-natured tom. "Did StarClan tell either of you where Rainwillow's spirit went if she didn't go to StarClan?"

"Not to me," Cloudpaw meowed at the same time as Pigeonwing, who looked even more distraught after that. Cloudpaw wanted to comfort her but didn't really know how, she wasn't sure if it would be appreciated either. Pigeonwing had always been a little closed off, during both half-moon meetings and gatherings and even when Cloudpaw had come to ask if she could borrow some much needed herbs from VioletClan. She'd shoved a bundle Cloudpaw's way and immediately turned away to walk further into her den.

Cloudpaw still felt bad for her though and glanced towards Eelleaf, hoping that he might know what to do. The tom met her questioning gaze and nodded, getting up to sit beside Pigeonwing, letting the molly lean on him. Cloudpaw stood there for awhile, watching Eelleaf silently comfort Pigeonwing.

Eventually though, the molly took a deep breath and pulled away from Eelleaf who politely stepped a couple of paces back, giving his fellow medicine cat space. Pigeonwing seemed to be thinking deeply about what she wanted to say, her eyes narrowed in thought.

"So," she began, her voice still tinged with sorrow, "Rainwillow is not in StarClan and StarClan itself appears to either be unaware of her whereabouts or they know but are refusing to tell us. No matter which it is, we have a huge problem on our paws. Without Rainwillow's spirit around to tell us who murdered her and put the

mystery to rest, I'm afraid the hostility between RoseClan and VioletClan will only increase the longer the culprit remains unknown."

Cloudpaw winced, knowing that Pigeonwing was right. Troutpelt may be the loudest and quickest to instigate a fight he was not the only one who's suspicion of VioletClan as a whole had been growing day by day. She was so glad that Featherstar was a cat who always carefully examined every path forward before making a decision as a more aggressive leader might have already called for a war moons ago. Cloudpaw really hoped nothing like that would happen, there was no certainty that it was a VioletClan cat that had killed Rainwillow and even if it was, that didn't mean the entire Clan should be punished for it.

"Are there other places a spirit can go?" She decided to ask, slightly changing the subject. She'd rather not think too much about what would happen if a war actually broke out.

"I suppose they might get trapped here if they're unable to move to the stars for some reason but I highly doubt that would happen when we have StarClan to guide us. Kittypets, loners and rogues likely have their own versions of StarClan but Rainwillow was a Clanborn cat and had no relatives living outside the Clan." Pigeonwing answered, growing visibly nervous as she spoke for a reason not yet known to Cloudpaw.

It took Pigeonwing a few heartbeats to gather her next words, her tail swishing beside her. "And then there's the Dark Forest but that simply *can't* be possible, Rainwillow can't have gone *there*."

"The Dark Forest?" Eelleaf repeated with a twitch of his ear, "I thought those were just nursery tales to get kits to behave."

Pigeonwing shook her head, "no it's real, although from what I've heard it's been fairly quiet over there for several seasons so I guess StarClan didn't think it was necessary to bring it up with us."

"Is that a good idea?" Cloudpaw asked, her tail puffed up and swaying slightly. "What if the Clans forget it exists and the cats in there might see that as a good oppurtunity to do something bad?"

"I'm sure StarClan would do something before that happened, I don't think we need to worry about that." Eellleaf tried to reassure her and though Cloudpaw nodded at him, she still felt uneasy.

All three medicine cats fell silent then, pondering over what they knew and what they didn't. In the end, they didn't have a lot of information to go off of, just that Rainwillow wasn't in StarClan for some reason. Where could her spirit possibly be? Cloudpaw was starting to get tired and she didn't think any of them had any more to say right now. Perhaps they should reconvene during the daytime once they'd had some time to sleep and think things over.

Throwing a sideways glance to Dawnclaw, who awkardly stood a few steps away and was watching the medicine cats with rapt attention, Cloudpaw gave a tiny nod to the warrior. Her silent message was received and Dawnclaw came forwards to sit next to Cloudpaw, her hemlock-green eyes glancing at the water in the stump for a single moment before focusing back on Eelleaf and Pigeonwing.

"It is getting late," she meowed with a tone that left no room for argument. "Cloudpaw needs to be well rested tomorrow, is your discussion finished?"

Pigeonwing made a light snivelling sound - still upset about Rainwillow and her spirit's whereabouts - one that almost made Cloudpaw want to tear up too but the other medicine cat pulled herself together so fast that it left Cloudpaw confused and slightly impressed instead. The molly turned her head to face Dawnclaw, eyes back to their usual serious expression and when she spoke her voice didn't waver one bit.

"Yes I believe we are for now, we do not have enough information to work out why Rainwillow is not where she should be. If possible, could you ask Featherstar if she would allow us to meet again in the near future outside of half-moon meetings and gatherings in the event that we learn more? And Eelleaf, do you mind asking Newtstar the same?"

"That seems reasonable, I will ask Featherstar if she agrees." Dawnclaw answered while Eelleaf nodded, the four cats saying a

quick goodbye to each other before parting ways.

Cloudpaw and Dawnclaw walked back to camp in silence which Cloudpaw appreciated, trying to have a conversation with so many questions buzzing in her head sounded like a not so fun time. She wanted to curl up in her nest and deal with all of this *tomorrow*.

It was as they got closer to camp that she began to pick up on strange noises coming from their exact destination. It kind of sounded like cats fighting? A foreboding of dread settled into Cloudpaw's stomach as Dawnclaw tensed beside her, the warrior's nose in the air and her mouth slightly open to better catch a scent.

"I smell VioletClan," Dawnclaw stated as her claws unsheated, the fur along her neck and back puffing up.

The two glanced at each other for only a single heartbeat before simultaniously taking off into a run, the sounds only becoming louder and louder.